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ABSTRACT

The Urban Education Studies focuses its efforts on the study of promising educational programs in urban school districts. Experience has confirmed the basic assumption that many programs and strategies of demonstrated or potential excellence are to be found in the urban setting. The generalizations gleaned from the data and on-site visits accentuate the importance of program leadership, staff commitment, Federal program support, program evaluation, alternative student choices, and involvement of the community in planning and implementation. Cross-functional study teams which have been used in the on-site visits have proven successful. The research process used by these teams acts as an instrument for improving communication among reference organizations and also as a means for identifying and examining the conditions under which successful programs operate. Some of the prerequisites for educational improvement indicated by the findings of the cross-functional teams include the equitable allocation of resources, flexibility in school organization and modes of instruction, and the utilization of the total urban environment as a resource for educational experiences. (Author/EB)

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URBAN EDUCATION STUDIES: ASSIMILATION OF PROGRAMS INTO CONTINUING DISTRICT OPERATIONS

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URBAN EDUCATION STUDIES: ASSIMILATION OF PROGRAMS INTO CONTINUING DISTRICT OPERATIONS

by

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April 9, 1979

The great majority of recent reports from commissions, researchers, and evaluators have focused on the inadequacies, incompetencies, and failures of our urban school systems. Many of these reports contain only passing reference to redeeming factors found within the school districts; few studies have concentrated on those programs that are providing sound education and expanded opportunities for the youth of our great cities.

Educational leaders in our urban schools are seeking inroads to providing a viable and meaningful education for all of their students. They are learning a great deal from their mistakes; however, they are looking for information that relates to specific conditions that characterize success, rather than failure. Just as it is important to identify problem areas in our schools, it is also critical that we examine those areas in which school districts are attaining success. More important is the need to understand program characteristics that lead to assimilation into district operations.

The Urban Education Studies (UES), directed by Francis S. Chase under a grant from the Spencer Foundation and a National Institute of Education contract, is cosponsored by the Council of the Great City Schools and the University Council for Educational Administration. It is focusing its efforts on the

study of promising educational programs in urban school districts. Its objectives are threefold:

- Increased knowledge of promising developments and problem solving strategies;
- Improved communication among those providing leadership for improvement of education; and
- Acceleration of efforts toward renewal and reform.

The use of an acton research approach by the Studies provides a vehicle for improving communication among educational leaders and a means for identifying and examining the conditions under which successful programs are operating. This report of research in process will give insights to future program adoptions.

Improved Communications Through Cross-Functional Teams

One of the Studies' objectives is to improve communication among those providing leadership for improvement of education. To accomplish this objective, visitation teams of 8-12 members are formed using personnel from participating districts, university professors, graduate students and members of boards of education. It was felt that multiple communication links would be established among the team members which would encourage the exchange of information among their reference organizations. Teams were formed based on member's background and experience so that their participation would contribute in the cross-functional sense, to the study of the target program.

Six school districts were invited to participate in the second year's activities (1978-79) -- Detroit, Chicago, Indianapolis, Columbus, Philadelphia, and Norfolk. These school districts were selected on the basis of student composition, physical and geographical characteristics, and the presence of

programs exhibiting successful characteristics. To supplement observations and provide baseline data for the study, a survey of thirty of the nation's largest urban school districts (conducted during the first year's study) was used as a source document.

New teams were formed for each district visit, with most selected school district personnel taking part in one or two visits. In each district, programs from five general areas were studied; Action-Learning, Cultural Pluralism, Basic Skills, School-Community Interactions, and Special Education. At the conclusion of each visit, exit briefings were held with the Superintendents and district personnel to present the team findings. The briefing format provided an opportunity for free discussion and exchange among all parties.

The cross-functional teams solidified quickly. Without exception, members worked together, each contributing and extracting information which was relevant to the accomplishment of the Study. The gap between university professor and practitioner was bridged by the willingness of the team members to focus their skills in the pursuit of a common goal. Neither professor-student nor consultant-client relationships were evident. All parties felt that they were fulfilling a particular role for which he/she was especially qualified.

Secondary effects were also observed in the interaction of the cross-functional team with indigeneous school district staff and administrators. A sense of pride and accomplishment was observed in people who were involved in programs that were beginning to show positive results. The interest of the visiting teams in the specific programs prompted free and open

discussion, not only of solved problems, but also of those not yet solved (or encountered). The process of a multiple-linkage appeared to act as a mode of renewal. This was later confirmed by comments from the Superintendents of districts visited.

The research process itself became a very potent instrument for improving communication, while other study objectives provided a common goal as a focus of diverse abilities and backgrounds.

Program Assimilation

The primary goal of the cross-functional teams was the indepth study of programs in the participating school districts. Their tasks included the analysis of data and information provided by the district, verification of operational and implementational characteristics, and discussion with district staff and administrators. Team debriefings and individual reports served as the primary source of information concerning each of the thirty-six programs visited in the six cities. Many of the programs studied during the first year were initiated in response to the emphasis placed on certain national objectives by the Federal Government. The first year's Studies indicate many of the successful programs instituted under these conditions are not extended after Federal support is withdrawn. In other cases, successful programs are continued after withdrawal of supplemental funding. Examination of program continuance and/or extension has implications for the selection and development of innovative practices in the urban settings.

The six school districts involved in the 1978-79 Studies nominated a total of thirty-six programs. Of these programs, seven involved Career/Education/Vocational Education; eleven involved alternative schools; ten were

concerned with basic skill development or management systems; and eight were directed toward individual exemplary schools or special education projects. As stated above, the school district nominated these programs on the basis of the Urban Education Studies criteria for programs that are beginning to have effect in our large urban school districts — programs, activities or operations which are unusually successful in improving educational opportunities and achievement for substantial numbers of students.

For the purpose of this paper, an arbitrary criteria was developed to distinguish those programs which were apparently assimilated to a large extent into the schools district's operation: (1) The program/activity must have been operation for a minimum of five years; and (2) The program/activity must be at least 70 per cent funded by district operatings funds. It was felt that these criteria would differentiate the thirty-six programs under study. Programs had to meet both criteria for selection.

Applying the first criteria, eighteen of the thirty-six programs nominated were considered. After the application of the second criteria, eleven programs remained in consideration. These eleven programs (some of which have yet to be studied on-site) appear to concentrate on the areas of alternative education and basic skills. Both of these areas are of great interest in our large school systems. An example of these programs include Elementary Excellence in the Chicago Public Schools — a model school in which administrative style and central office support have contributed to its very open climate and success with children.

Other examples include the Behavior Analysis approach to elementary education which is being utilized by the Philadelphia schools on a limited

basis. Enthusiastic leadership and continuous staff development have contributed to its success and longevity.

Although it was our intitial intention to show a relationship between objective fidelity and assimilation, the evidence cannot at this time support such a contention. In many cases objectives have been altered, but it was impossible to make any comparison or measure of the degree of change required for apparent assimilation of the program into district operations.

These eleven programs appear to provide additional evidence in support of our previous generalizations with respect to the aspects of education examined.[1]

1. Federal intervention -- through grants and contracts, equal opportunity requirements, and court decrees -- have either triggered or expedited a high proportion of the innovations which urban districts rate as unusually successful. Many of the programs reported as most successful were funded in whole or in part by federal funds. This may have been due to the type of programs examined and the district's desire to be represented by recent innovations. Other programs were initiated in reponse to court orders or legislation directed at the elimination of discrimination. However, federal funds and initiatives are being used effectively by district administrators to bring about educational changes for the district.
2. Local and situational factors — including program leadership, staff and district commitment, and effectiveness of implementation — are

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[1] Urban Education Studies 1977-78 Annual Report

crucial to program success. The effectiveness of implementation is determined by a number of factors, of which none is more important than capable and effective program leaders. This coupled with the ability to foster local entrepreneurship characteristics in staff provide the school/program manager with a true challenge. In case after case, the mutual supportiveness and cooperation of the administrator and staff were the overriding condition for success.

3. Continuous program evaluation, adaptation to revealed student needs, and staff development are essential to ongoing program success and local support. Successful programs were characterized by built-in renewal procedures. These procedures include evaluation of both process and outcomes with an effective feedback mechanism. Administrators of these successful programs are beginning to utilize evaluation in the sense of updating and renewal rather than a "go" - "no go" approach. Local needs assessment and problem solving are essential to enthusiastic commitment to the programs and are critical factors in achievement of program objectives.
4. Most of the highly successful and promising programs represent significant departures from traditional schooling through emphasis on student choice and responsibility, experience-based education, and greater use of resources outside of the school. Many of these successful programs have incorporated action-learning techniques and work-study experiences for students. Community involvement takes many forms usch as parents-as-partners, the use of citizen volunteers, on-the-job internships and wise use of many kinds of cultural resources.

5. The many promising approaches and programs, which are now offering invigorating educational experiences to some of the previously disadvantaged, can be made available to increased numbers of students through systematic needs assessment, curriculum and staff development, and continuing professional citizen collaboration toward equality and excellence.

The K-12 Urban Career Education Project which was implemented in the Dallas Independent School District during 1977-78 school year provided evidence of a program innovation that successfully addressed the five criteria mentioned above. Because of the comprehensive nature of that career education effort, especially the component that fostered collaborations between the schools and the community, the kindergarten through sixth grade awareness portion of the project was adopted by the school district. The Dallas Independent School District's decision to assimilate this program innovation into the continuing program of instruction was a classical indication of local support initiated by federal intervention.

The small number of programs used as targets in this small portion of the Studies demonstrate the promising developments that are taking shape in our Urban Schools. Although these programs do provide important insight into the assimilation of programs initiated from differing sources, they cannot be used as completely representative. Our site teams pointed out possible shortcomings, including the over reliance on Federal intervention and made certain recommendations for improvement.

Some school districts are developing plans that provide for a gradual take-over in the funding of projects initiated through Federal intervention.

For example, the K-12 Urban Career Education Project in the Detroit Public Schools has decreased reliance on Federal funds by 50 per cent during the current school year. The project was originally funded wholly by the U. S. Office of Career Education during the development and implementation phases. Thus after two years of total reliance on Federal funds, a project has been sustained and expanded in an urban district by combining local and Federal resources.

These generalizations of findings do allow a statement of some of the prerequisites for successful reform and renewal. They include the equitable allocation of resources; flexibility in school organization and modes of instruction; and the utilization of the total urban environment as a resource for educative experiences. Leaders in our school systems must be aware of the conditions necessary for renewal and aware of the possible steps to attaining reform. They must meet the challenge of developing committed program managers, encouraging local entrepreneur characteristics in their staffs, and ensuring the incorporation of needs-assessment and evaluation results in program implementation.

Summary

The Urban Education Studies continues its study of successful programs in large city school districts. Our experiences have confirmed the basic assumption that many programs and strategies of demonstrated or potential excellence are to be found in the urban setting. The generalizations gleaned from the data and on-site visits accentuate the importance of program leadership and staff commitment; Federal program support; program evaluation; alternative student choices and involvement of the community

in planning and implementation.

The utilization of cross-functional study teams as investigators for on-site visits has proven successful. The multiple links established by the tailoring of team composition opens the way for the improvement of communications among professional educators; aids in the formation of dyadic links for information exchange; focuses upon the employment of diverse professional skills in pursuit of a common goal; and leads to the mutual stimulation and renewal of all participants.

The study processes used and the identification of certain conditions and aspects of successful programs holds many implications for school administrators and those who train administrators. The process holds implications as to the potential available in cooperative cross-functional endeavors between school districts, universities, and other educational entities. The promising developments identified by the Studies holds implications for actions of administrators in the areas of community interaction, staff development and other "non-nuts and bolts" areas of management.

These conditions and aspects can only be identified and knowledge of them disseminated by organizations such as the Urban Education Studies. It must be the individual involved, with support from their reference organizations, that interpret and operationalize these concepts.